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TAGS: PGOV ECON SOCI SCUL IR
SUBJECT: IRAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM - AN INSIDE LOOK

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Director, Iran Regional Presence Office - Dubai, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Iran's best universities largely focus on engineering, which the country's top students pursue for its supposed financial reward. Our interlocutors ranked Iran's best schools similarly, starting with Sharif University of Technology and generally concluding with the Islamic Azad University, Iran's largest university. University admissions are largely based on performance on the nation-wide entrance exam though additional factors, such as Basij membership, may also be considered. Adherence to government-policy was also said to be an important factor in determining faculty advancement. Iranian universities are a mix of good and bad - of rigorous academic standards and in some cases, ideological pressure. For most young Iranians, however, they are an avenue to financial reward.
End Summary.

¶2. (C) IRPO officer in December 2008 and January 2009 met with Iranian students and professors to discuss Iranian universities. He spoke with graduates from the University of Tehran and the Islamic Azad University, married professors from the University of Esfahan, and a professor from Tarbiat Modares University.

University Reputations

¶3. (C) Iranian interlocutors consistently mentioned the same universities as Iran's best universities, including Sharif University of Technology, the University of Tehran, Amirkabir University of Technology, Iran University of Science and Technology, Khaje Nasir Toosi University of Technology, the University of Isfahan, and the University of Shiraz. The Islamic Azad graduate remarked that only "geniuses" attend Sharif University. All of these schools primarily focus on engineering and technology programs. Tehran University, in addition to its well-regarded engineering programs, has a broader range of programs, such as economics, history, and literature to choose from. Tehran also features a department of North American and European Studies in its highly regarded School of Law and Political Science.

¶4. (C) Iran's best students tend to pursue engineering programs

or medical school. (Note: Medical school in Iran begins after high school; students apply to a medical school as they would any other university.) All our interlocutors explained that engineering and medical careers are financially rewarding, which is why they attract Iran's best students.

¶ 15. (C) The University of Tehran graduate said that students at universities located in Tehran tend to be more politicized than elsewhere in Iran simply because Tehran is the capital. The Islamic Azad graduate instead noted that students from the University of Tehran and Amirkabir University, in particular, have reputations for being more politically engaged. Continuing, he contrasted the University of Tehran, where students invite political speakers to campus or debate politics, to the branch of Islamic Azad he attended, where such a dialogue was wholly absent.

¶ 16. (C) The private Islamic Azad University is Iran's largest university and has a mixed reputation for academics. The Tehran University graduate spoke dismissively of it, saying that just about anyone can attend. Islamic Azad has its own entrance exam and unlike the government universities, students pay tuition. According to its website, the university has roughly 1.3 million students spread over more than 300 branches inside Iran, and one overseas branch - in Dubai. Although some of the locations may be full campuses, the Islamic Azad graduate said many of the branches, including the one he attended, are single buildings and he did not think the university had dorms. He noted that the quality of the instruction at Islamic Azad varied by the program and by the location.

¶ 17. (C) Islamic Azad considers itself a private institution and says that it receives no government financial support. However,

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the University of Esfahan professors questioned the school's actual independence. Expediency Council Chairman and head of the Assembly of Experts Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani founded the university in 1985, and is head of the university's board of trustees. The University president is said to be a Rafsanjani ally.

Academic Materials and University Advancement

¶ 18. (C) The professors maintained that they use up-to-date texts and other materials in their classrooms, though they conceded that some professors do not and the quality of the material varied by university and by professor. The couple from the University of Esfahan also said that the students too should be responsible for doing their own internet research to ensure that their material is current. They also said that the IRIG helps academics purchase text books. The Tarbiat Modares professor added that his university, beginning three years ago, started pressuring faculty members to publish two papers a year in established journals. An Iranian Canadian academic who has done research in Iran told us separately that Iran lags far behind the West in social science research. She said texts and research materials in these disciplines were outdated, and many of the best professors had been forced into retirement.

¶ 19. (C) The University of Esfahan professors said that advancement within the university reflects ideology as well as academic background. They complained remaining beardless or speaking out against university policies can jeopardize one's

advancement. (Comment: Although the professors did not attribute the ideological standards to Ahmadinejad, their comments are consistent with the president's efforts to change, in his words, the "secular education system." Ahmadinejad's government subsequently forced many university professors into retirement. Some such professors were later offered positions at Islamic Azad University.)

The Road to University Admissions

¶10. (C) Iranian students aspiring to attend universities in Iran must first take the university entrance exam, or Konkur. All interlocutors stressed the difficulty of the exam and the amount of time students spend preparing for the test. The University of Esfahan professors explained that their daughter, who is currently preparing for the Konkur, spends as much as 16 hours a day studying. Having helped her prepare, they said that the material she studies is occasionally PhD level. Separately, the Islamic Azad University graduate said he spent all of high school preparing for the test. The test takes an entire day to complete; afterwards, students are ranked according to their performance, from one to as many students that took the test.

¶11. (C) The Esfahan professors said that the Konkur's difficulty and importance have created a cottage industry of private tutoring. They complained that some teachers will purposely degrade the quality of their in-school teaching to drive up demand for their private tutoring.

¶12. (C) After receiving their scores, students apply to specific programs within universities rather than to the university itself. For example, the Islamic Azad graduate said that he applied to medical engineering programs at Amirkabir University in Tehran, Sahand University of Technology in Tabriz, and a branch of Islamic Azad University in Tehran. He chose Islamic Azad because Amirkabir University's medical engineering faculty also taught at Islamic Azad. After matriculating, changing degree programs is difficult.

¶13. (C) Universities primarily consider students' Konkur score when weighing applicants, but our interlocutors specified

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several other factors that may be considered. These include the average Konkur score of an applicant's high school, Basij membership, gender, and whether an applicant is related to a soldier killed in the Iran-Iraq war. Basij membership or being the child of an Iran-Iraq war victim was said to confer a "point," however the weight of such a point is not clear. The married professors from Esfahan University said the government has started reserving 70 percent of university seats for males in order to correct a gender imbalance now favoring females; the professors were clearly worried that their daughter would not do well enough to gain entry. (Comment: The number of Iranian women attending university has been steadily increasing for several years and in 2008 65 percent of Iranian university students were women.)

COMMENT

¶14. (C) Iran's universities are a mix of good and bad; its best universities are known internationally and avenues exist,

primarily via the sprawling Islamic Azad, to make higher education broadly available, albeit at high cost. The government universities are, however, another means for the IRIG to exert ideological influence, either by rewarding Basij members with easier admissions or punishing professors not heeding the regime's line. Iranians value education strongly, but Iran's best students now view its importance more as a means for financial gain or exit from Iran.

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